

Statement of Mr. Stenholm
Before the Committee on Rules
Subcommittee on Technology and the House
U.S. House of Representatives
June 16, 2004

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McGovern, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing and giving me the opportunity to offer my views. I applaud the Committee for its pursuit of improvements to Rule X and I look forward to the results of your investigation.

Mr. Chairman, let me start by expressing my support for Chairman Goodlatte's leadership of our Committee. The Agriculture Committee has a long-standing tradition of bipartisanship and takes very seriously its responsibility to work together to improve our nation's food and fiber production policies. Our colleagues believe this work is one of the most important jobs they have in this House.

While I am sure that there are many issues related to Rule X that will occupy your attention, I expect that matters related to jurisdiction over the Department of Homeland Security will be key. As such, I am confining my comments at this time to those matters.

Mr. Chairman, testifying in favor of a permanent Committee on Homeland Security last year, an outside witness justified his position to the Select Committee by asking the question: "Is the issue of homeland security important enough to warrant a separate committee focused exclusively on the policies, programs, and problems of homeland security?" In point of fact, I believe the correct question to be: "Is the issue of homeland security important enough to warrant getting our policies right?" The answer there is clearly "Yes."

Mr. Chairman, creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was a major change in the organization of our government. The Department's success in every area is crucial to the security of our people. The Agriculture Committee has an interest in the transfer of functions of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to the DHS. We understand the reason for the transfer; APHIS personnel have long performed a key border security role. The agency's work is done under statutes developed over the years by the Agriculture Committee to address the many pests and diseases that threaten our food and fiber production system; APHIS has done that job well. We feel that Agriculture Committee oversight of the agency provides the stability needed to ensure the ongoing success of this mission.

Mr. Chairman, I am sure you are aware that various problems have confronted the DHS in its infancy. I will provide an instance relating to its agriculture functions and how Congressional oversight came into play:

Agricultural inspectors are stationed at ports and airports throughout the US. These 3000+ inspectors -- formerly with APHIS -- are responsible for screening arriving passengers and cargo for materials that might introduce plant or animal diseases or pests. This work has been going on for more than a century and is a complex task. While the agency's work is not

focused solely on terrorism, as some have noted, a catastrophic animal disease doesn't care if it is introduced by a malicious terrorist or by a careless tourist; the effect is pretty much the same.

However, DHS proposed to eliminate the agricultural inspectors altogether and to disperse their duties among the uniformed Customs Border Patrol officers. This was a well-intended attempt at gaining efficiency for the taxpayers. However, had that plan been implemented the impact on American agriculture, and the subsequent cost to the taxpayers, could have been astronomical. Our agricultural inspectors are highly trained professionals with years of science training. Many hold advanced degrees in disciplines like entomology or plant pathology. They undergo extensive training in disease identification, technical lab analysis and interview methods. Under the DHS plan, the replacements would have had only 72 hours of training in agricultural disease and pest identification.

When members of the House Agriculture Committee learned of this plan, we immediately began the process of educating the DHS about the implications of their proposal. They came to understand the unworkable nature, even the danger, of their plan and ultimately scrapped it altogether, opting instead to keep the agricultural inspectors. In fact, DHS now plans to increase their total numbers.

This is a clear example of the critical need to keep the expertise of the traditional committees of jurisdiction actively involved. Had the attention and oversight of our Committee not been present in the case just mentioned, we might have been left exposed to billions of dollars of damage to the US agricultural economy. One example would be if an illness such as foot and mouth disease had unintentionally slipped into the country under the proposed DHS inspection plan.

Mr. Chairman, while I don't recommend the creation of a permanent Homeland Security Committee, I do want to make clear that we need to increase our efforts to make sure the job of homeland security is done right. One thing history shows is this: while every proposal to realign jurisdiction sets out to solve the problem of jurisdictional overlaps, no plan can really get this job done. In the early 1990s, the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress revived the idea of using ad hoc committees to deal with crucial, cross-cutting matters. I supported this. As you consider proposed changes to House Rules, I urge you to consider giving more life to the Speaker's little-used Rule 12 authority to refer matters to ad hoc committees.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, it was a good idea when House Rules were amended to limit each Member to two committee assignments. Unfortunately, this rule has been thoroughly ignored. Today, 125 Members of the House serve on three or more committees. We should strive to achieve the goal of the two-committee limit. Establishing another permanent committee will only make reaching that goal more difficult.

Mr. Chairman, thank you once again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to working with the Rules Committee as it continues its process of reviewing House Rules.